

THE AGNICAYANA PROJECT

Frits Staal

THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED to the 1975 performance of the Atirātra-Agnicayana were briefly described in the Preface to the first volume of this book. Other features relevant to the background were touched upon in the sections on the Nambudiri tradition in Chapter 6 of Part I, and in the Preliminaries of Part II. In the following pages the Agnicayana project will be described in greater detail, and attention will be given to organization and budgets; local reactions; publicity, rumors, and controversies surrounding the performance; and other matters of general interest. Technical information on the audiovisual documentation will be provided in Part V.

The performance was originally planned for 1974, but the then prospective yajamāna withdrew at the critical moment. In the resulting confusion, Cherumukku Vaidikan came to our rescue and undertook the overall responsibility for organizing a performance in 1975 with his third son, Nīlakaṇṭhan Somayajipad, as yajamāna. Itti Ravi Nambudiri, who had always supported our endeavors, assumed responsibility for the audgātra chants, for the construction of the ritual enclosure on a piece of his land in Panjal, and for procuring the bricks and other material prerequisites. However, it proved extremely difficult to find the four required Sāmavedins because of the chief difficulty affecting all Vedic fieldwork: those few who are well versed are necessarily the most orthodox and therefore the least willing to divulge their traditional knowledge. Once again the entire performance was almost called off until we finally prevailed upon a brahmin who was indeed out of practice, but who had at least originally undergone the traditional training. After overcoming other similar difficulties, the basic decisions and arrangements were made in December 1974 when Robert Gardner and I visited Kerala.

A problem that loomed large in our final discussions was to arrive at a compromise between brahmin orthodoxy and the requirements of our sound and film crews. It had been obvious from the beginning that non-Nambudiris would not be allowed to enter the ritual enclosure. Yet it was felt by all concerned that it should be possible to compensate for this physical exclusion from the locus of activity by eliminating possible obstructions to the cameras' line of vision and by attaching microphones to the roofs of the enclosure throughout the performance. In the course of discussions with Erkkara, C.V., and Itti Ravi, agreement was reached on all these points. Accordingly, the two written agreements separately concluded with

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C.V. and Itti Ravi, which I signed on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, contained the following "Guidelines for Filming":

1. Cameramen can go up to the enclosures of the Prācīnavamśa and the Mahāvedi on all sides. Other non-Nambudiri visitors may approach no closer than five feet from the southern side of the Mahāvedi enclosure only.
2. As needed, one cameraman may move discreetly between the Prācīnavamśa and the Mahāvedi, and may move from there around the Mahāvedi from north toward the east and south.
3. Roofs and enclosing walls will be constructed in accordance with the requirements of the cinematographers.
4. The space on the east side of the Mahāvedi will be reserved for the cameramen, who shall at all times keep a minimum distance of two feet from the Yūpa.

Fortunately, we were later assisted by two Nambudiri cameramen who could enter the enclosure at all times.

We agreed to contribute the expenses for the construction of the enclosure and for the materials required for the performance in accordance with the following budget:

1. Tiles (bricks)	Rupees 4,500/-
2. Construction of the śālā, including special arrangements for cameramen and visitors	12,000/-
3. Vastram (garments: 450)	3,600/-
4. Ghee (50 liters)	2,000/-
5. Temporary sheds (dining halls, etc.)	1,500/-
6. Ney Viḷakkū (ghee lamp)	60/-
7. Gold (14 1/2 grams)	725/-
8. Silver	10/-
9. Wages for goldsmith, for kuṇḍala (earrings), etc.	50/-
10. Wood for śruk, etc. (2 sets)	400/-
11. Wages for carpenter	800/-
12. Pottery containers (2 sets)	500/-
13. Goats (14)	1,750/-
14. A cow with milk (13 days)	60/-
15. A goat with milk (13 days)	30/-
16. Cow milk for sacrifice (50 liters)	100/-
17. Goat milk for sacrifice (5 liters)	10/-
18. Horses (2)	850/-
19. A donkey	50/-
20. Skin of an ox	75/-

PART III PERSPECTIVES

21. Skin of a black deer	Rs. 60/-
22. Honey	5/-
23. Coconut oil for lamps	700/-
24. Agra pūjā for Vaidikas	100/-
25. Rental of Soma cow	10/-
26. Wages for Nair servants (42)	420/-
27. Watchmen (6)	600/-
28. Maid servants	60/-
29. Oxen (2)	15/-
30. Travel for ritual purposes	60/-
31. Wages for vaidyan	120/-
32. Rice for the sacrifice	40/-
33. Food for Yajamāna and Patni	150/-
34. Darbha, Kuśa, etc.	300/-
35. Unforeseen expenses	1,500/-
Total Rs. 33,210/-	
(approximately U.S. \$4,313)	

Most of these items arrived in due course, though there were some problems in connection with the bricks, as we have seen (Vol. I, page 199). The Rāja of Kollengode was officially approached by Cherumukku Vaidikan on behalf of the Sabhā Maṭham to provide Soma, antelope skins, and various woods. Plenty of Soma stalks arrived in time, together with two decrepit horses, a cow, and an ass. The extra sets of wooden and clay implements mentioned on the list were made for scholarly preservation and are now in my office on the Berkeley campus.

We agreed to pay compensation and living allowances for forty priests and assistants during the two-and-a-half months in which rehearsals were to take place. Such rehearsals are common in connection with the preparation for large ritual performances, but they were particularly necessary in 1975, since the last performance of the Agnicayana had taken place in 1957, almost twenty years earlier. Some of the younger priests had therefore never witnessed an actual performance. It is also customary for additional priests to be trained in case any of those originally selected are prevented from assuming their roles for whatever reason: the performance, once begun, should on no account be stopped. It had been decided that C.V.'s fifth son, Krishnan Nambudiri, would be the adhvaryu—the most difficult and onerous of the priestly tasks—which he had performed once before (in 1956). His elder brother, Vasudevan Akkitiripad, was ready to take over from him in case it should be necessary. In 1975 we faced yet another difficulty: the new yajamāna himself also wavered. Indeed, at no time prior to the beginning of the performance was there complete certainty that he would carry out his declared intention. Under the circumstances, Cherumukku Vaidikan himself decided that he would be ready to take his place.

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Though not eager to assume this responsibility, he was eligible, able, and willing to do it, should it be necessary.

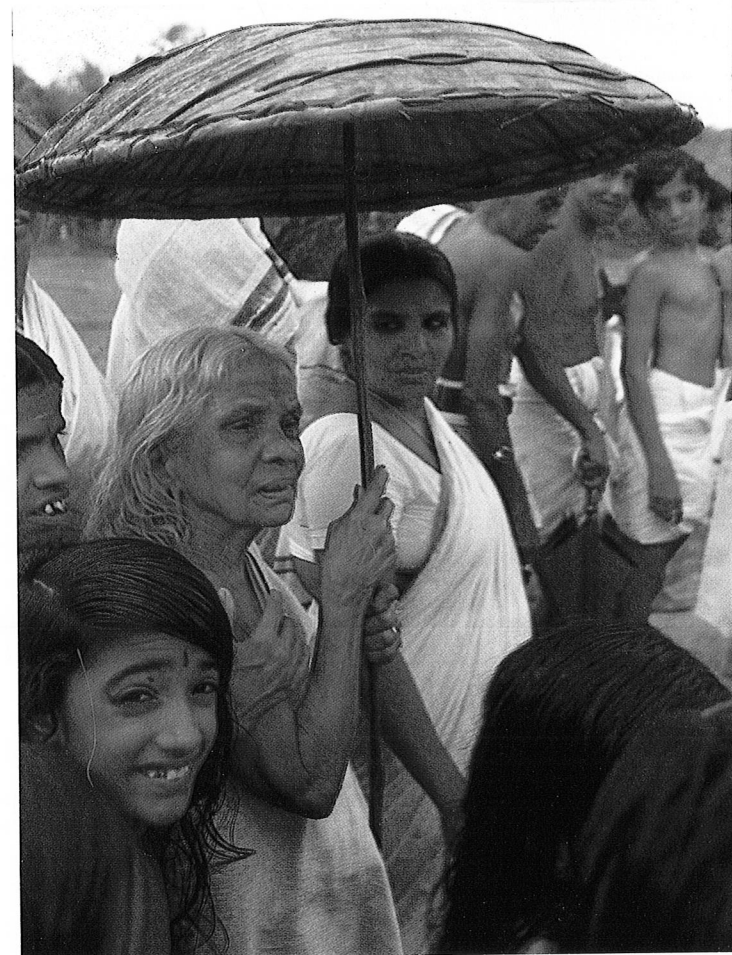
The rehearsals for the Sāmaveda priests took place in Panjal and were directed by Nellikat Nilakaṇṭhan Akkitiripad and Itti Ravi Nambudiri; the rehearsals for all the others took place in Shoranur and were directed by Erkkara Raman Nambudiri and Cherumukku Vaidikan. The contribution we made toward the expenses, including a small travel allowance and the cost of offerings to Dakṣiṇāmūrti and Gaṇapati, was Rs. 98,100/- (approximately \$12,740).

An essential feature of all Indian rituals is the accommodation and feeding of guests. In fact, honoring guests is a yajña called *nṛyajña* or *manuṣyayajña*. In the R̥gveda, Agni himself is described as a guest in the house of the sacrificer. During the 1975 performance responsibility for the guests was assumed by Mathur Alarkan Nambudiripad, a prominent inhabitant of Panjal. The Nambudiri guests were to be fed in a building adjacent to the Panjal temple, where they would go in any case for their worship and bath in the temple tank. To form an idea of the magnitude of this catering operation, it will be sufficient to ponder on the details of the budget that we also agreed to fund as part of our contribution:

PLATE 18A-B

I	
1. Boiled rice: 210 paras (2100 kg)	Rs. 8,400/-
2. Raw rice: 10 paras	425/-
3. Ghee (clarified butter): 3 Eḍaṅgaḷi (3 kg)	108/-
4. Curd: 50 kudams (600 liters)	1,200/-
5. Coconut (dry): 200	210/-
6. Coconut (less ripe): 100	125/-
7. Common salt (loose): 60 liters	9/-
8. Common salt (packet): 14	4/-
9. Tuvara dal (a lentil): 80 kg	280/-
10. Kaḍala dal (kind of pulse): 15 kg	65/-
11. Uḷuṇṇu dal (<i>Phaseolus radiatus</i>): 70 kg	245/-
12. Pottu kadala (another kind of pulse): 10 kg	20/-
13. Payar (a kind of bean): 10 kg	25/-
14. Mutira (horse gram): 10 kg	20/-
15. Mustard: 8 kg	43/-
16. Chili: 3 kg	48/-
17. Chili powder: 8 kg	130/-
18. Kottamalli (coriander): 6 kg	33/-
19. Uluva (fenugreek): 3 kg	14/-
20. Kāyam (<i>Assafoetida</i>): 1 kg	32/-
21. Turmeric powder: 3 kg	30/-
22. Jirakam (cumin seed): 1 1/4 kg	12/-
23. Cukku (dried ginger): 2 kg	22/-

. PLATE 18A-B
Nambudiri Visitors



A



B

PART III PERSPECTIVES

24. Black pepper: 1 kg	Rs.	11/-
25. Black pepper powder: 1 1/2 kg		23/-
26. Coconut oil: 80 kg		930/-
27. Gingelly (sesame) oil: 15 kg		145/-
28. Kerosine: 18 liters		55/-
29. Sarkara (brown sugar candy): 60 kg		150/-
30. Rava (cream of wheat): 80 kg		260/-

Rs. 13,074/-

II

1. Coffee powder: 12 kg	144/-
2. Tea: 10 kg	160/-
3. White sugar: 100 kg	450/-
4. Milk: 280 liters	630/-
5. Milk powder: 4 kg	120/-

Rs. 1,504/-

III

1. Gourd: 850 kg	510/-
2. Pumpkin: 425 kg	300/-
3. Yam: 60 kg	45/-
4. Cembu (<i>Caladium esculentum</i>): 30 kg	45/-
5. Cucumber: 150 kg	300/-
6. Mangoes: 1500	150/-
7. Drum sticks: 500	9/-
8. Bitter gourd: 500	50/-
9. Ladies finger: 1500	60/-
10. Tomatoes: 10 kg	12/-
11. Ginger (not dried): 5 kg	30/-
12. Chili (another kind): 8 kg	25/-
13. Kariveppu (bay) leaves: 10 kg	40/-
14. Coriander seedlings: 4 kg	15/-
15. Bananas (long variety): 1500	525/-
16. Bananas (short variety): 2500	250/-
17. Jack fruits	50/-
18. Banana leaves (to serve food): 11,250	1,700/-
19. Pappadam: 170 packets	350/-
20. Tamarind: 10 kg	30/-

Rs. 4,496/-

IV

1. Betal leaves: 150 packets	90/-
2. Areca nut: 1500	75/-

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3. Tobacco leaves: 8 kg	Rs.	96/-
4. Beedi, cigarettes, matches		50/-
5. Tobacco snuff		5/-
6. Lime		4/-
7. Eratti madhuram: 1/2 kg		10/-
	Rs.	330/-

V

1. Soap: 18 cakes	27/-
2. Washing soap: 10 bars	40/-
3. Vaka: 1 para	15/-
	<hr/>
Rs.	82/-

VI

1. Fire wood: 24 units	336/-
2. Three-para bamboo container: 12	48/-
3. Three-para bamboo containers (another size): 16	25/-
4. Three-para bamboo containers (another size): 2	6/-
5. Three-para bamboo containers (another size): 10	15/-
6. Grass mat container: 3	15/-
7. Bamboo mats: 4	25/-
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	Rs. 470/-

VII

1. Pottery of different sizes	Rs.	40/-
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VIII

1. Rent and repair charges for the vessels	600/-
2. Rent for four numbers of gas lights	280/-
3. Rent for electric wire and bulbs	280/-
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Rs.	1,160/-

IX

1. Labor charges	Rs.	2,004/-
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X

1. Remuneration for eleven cooks: 14 days	3,850/-
2. Remuneration for ten servers	1,680/-
3. Renumeration for supervisor and head cook	500/-
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	Rs. 6,030/

XI

1. Unforeseen items of expenditure	Rs.	310/-
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Total Rs. 29,500/-
(approximately U.S. \$3,831)

The entire catering operation was handled smoothly and efficiently. The number of guests during the last days increased unexpectedly, and as a result the quality and quantity of the meals decreased somewhat toward the end of the performance. Nambudiri guests slept in the temple, in or on the porches of adjacent buildings and homes, and sometimes in the *śālā*. Arrangements were made with the Traveller's Bungalow and the Guesthouse of the Public Works Department at Cheruthuruthy for foreign visitors (from Finland, Holland, Japan, and the United States). A group of ten visiting scholars from Poona found accomodation in the home of Mathur Alarkan Nambudiripad.

In the recent past, performances of Vedic rituals have taken place quietly, within Nambudiri compounds, and without being noticed by the outside world. In 1975 the situation was very different. Because of foreign participation, as well as the filming and recording activity, news about the impending performance spread rapidly to larger sections of the public and to the press. The Central and State Governments had been informed, which was not merely a matter of courtesy, but also necessary in view of the permission required to engage in the documentation and to import large amounts of equipment, films, tapes, and so forth. In fact, we provided facilities for a cameraman from the Ministry of Broadcasting and Information of the Government of India to make films, and gave copies of many of our recordings to All-India Radio at Kozhikode (Calicut).

Though few members of the public and representatives of the press had any idea of what the Agnicayana is, we witnessed the rapid formation of groups who were for or against it. Objections to the performance were primarily of two kinds. Some people did not approve of the filming of the event by foreigners. They claimed that the films would be used for cheap propaganda against India. The Communist Party (Marxist) decried in particular "the political penetration of Dollar Imperialism into India." But the chief objection was against the sacrifice of goats, a custom that was felt to be not merely barbaric, but contrary to the spirit of a nation dedicated to *ahiṃsā*, "non-violence." An influential Malayalam newspaper, *Mātrabhūmi*, published an editorial urging that the ritual be performed without the sacrifice of goats. *Malayāla Manorama*, another well-known paper, defended the traditional procedure. An avalanche of articles and letters to editors appeared in the press, pro and contra. Many people visited us and expounded their views. I recall in particular a delegation of Jain monks who had come all the way from South Canara to hold forth on the hideous implications of violence. I continued to explain to whoever would listen that our feelings were irrelevant, and that we hoped simply to record whatever would happen.

Although discussions on the presence, dollars, and motives of foreign scholars and cameramen were relatively few, the outpouring of sentiment over the goats was practically unbounded, and continued long after the

performance was over. A leader of one of the more militant political parties (Jan Sangh) declared that he would immolate himself in the sacrificial fire if the goats were to meet with that fate (which in any case they would not). The Trichur District Collector and Superintendent of Police, concerned about law and order, began to interfere, and consultations followed between them and ourselves involving the Panjal Village Council, the Kerala Government, and even the Central Government in New Delhi.

The priests did not oppose the exploration of alternatives to the goat sacrifice when popular sentiment and official pressure seemed to make this unavoidable. However, the ritual and technical questions of how to handle the prescribed recitations (mantra) and rites (kriyā) had to be resolved. A meeting was held on April 11, one day before the beginning of the performance, attended by Cherumukku Vaidikan, Erkkara Raman, Professor Sreekrishna Sarma, Dr. Kashikar together with some other Maharasthrian scholars, and myself. Dr. Kashikar explained the practice that had been adopted at Poona at a performance of the *Vājapeya* sacrifice in 1955. At that time, in the face of similar popular opposition, the animals, though present, were not sacrificed, and instead oblations of clarified butter were offered. Erkkara conveyed the Nambudiri decision: for the first time in the history of the Nambudiri tradition, the animals would be represented by rice flour folded in banana leaf in the same manner in which this is done at the *śrāddha* or funeral ceremonies, when the same substance also stands for an animal offering. The meeting was conducted in English and Malayalam, with Professor Sreekrishna Sarma translating.

The rice flour (aṭa) offered at the *śrāddha* is put in a banana leaf folded in the manner called *paitṛkam* "for ancestors." This is a representation of meat (*māṃsapratidhi*), and was therefore adopted for the animal sacrifices. When an offering of aṭa is made in temples, it is put in a banana leaf folded in the manner called *daivikam* "for gods." Both methods are illustrated by the Exhibit inside the back cover of this volume.

The decision of the meeting of April 11 was issued to the press in the form of a statement in English and Malayalam:

STATEMENT ISSUED BY SRI MUTTATHUKATTIL MAMUNNA ITTI RAVI
NAMBUDIRI AND DR. J. F. STAAL, CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL
COMMITTEE FOR ATIRATHRA AGNI CHAYANA

Members of the Namboodiri Community in Kerala decided some time ago to perform an Agni Chayana Vedic Yagam. An International Committee was formed consisting of several Sanskrit Scholars in India and abroad. Contributions were received from the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, and other foundations which would make it possible to film and record the rituals so that a permanent record would be available to scholars all over the world.

PLATE 19
Helper Dissuading Policeman



An agreement was made with the Government of India, which provides all facilities to visiting scholars and which will receive copies of all the films to be taken. The Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting has also deputed its Film Division to cover the proceedings.

The performance was organized by Cherumukku Vaidikan Vallabhan Somayajipad. Cherumukku Neelakandan Somayajipad agreed to be the "Yajamana." Full cooperation was given by Sri Vedaratnam Erkkara Raman Namboodiri and other Nambudiri Scholars. A reception committee has been set up to receive scholars from abroad and from other parts of India.

We understand from the Press and the Trichur Collector that popular sentiment has been voiced against the sacrifice of the animals which in Vedic times was part of this ritual. In view of this development, the organizers have decided to substitute Inanimate Substances in place of the animals. The organizers hereby assure the public that no animal sacrifice will take place. We request the cooperation of the public for the successful conduct of the Yagna.

The decision not to sacrifice goats, which was earlier adopted not only in Poona but also among Mādhva brahmins in the area of Udipi, has so far been resisted in Tanjore and Andhra Pradesh among Smārta brahmins who perform Soma rituals. Yet it is in some sense quite consistent with tradition. Mantras can never be changed or deleted, but material substances are liable to replacement. Baudhāyana mentions, for example, that the animal heads may be made of clay, though they can also be real (below, page 613). Soma itself was long ago replaced by a substitute.

In 1975, in spite of the decision to avoid killing goats, controversy continued to surround the performance. Even after it was over, one paper reported that films of goat sacrifice were taken to America. The majority of the press reports, however, calmed down after the ceremonies had begun. Here is the beginning of a representative article, "Controversial Yagna Begins," from the front page of an English-language newspaper from Cochin, *Sunday Standard* (April 13, 1975):

TRICHUR, April 12

Against the glare of publicity provoked by the fierce controversy in the State, the Vedic Yagna Athirathram or Agnichayanam commenced at the remote village of Panjal, near Cheruthuruthy, this morning.

The solemn rituals, which will last for twelve days from today, have drawn a large number of scholars, foreign and Indian, to the paddy fields where the yaga salas have been erected, and the

nearby Namboodiri illam, though the local people, except for a number of Namboodiris, were by and large unmoved.

The curiosity, evoked mainly by the controversy and the presence of nearly 25 foreign nationals from Canada to Japan with their batteries of movie cameras and sophisticated recording instruments, has lent some colour to the rare but elaborate rituals which otherwise would have gone almost unnoticed as a family ceremony.

However, despite an earlier talk that along with the prohibition of the sacrifice of goats the district authorities have also forbidden the filming and recording of the event by the foreigners, the latter were going about their jobs without hindrance and the small number of policemen present on the scene were there only to help them.

Similar press releases and word of mouth produced a gradually broadening stream of visitors. These included villagers from all over Kerala, curious to see the foreigners and their equipment, but increasingly arriving in a spirit and mood of devotion. Among these outsiders there was a strong tendency to conceive of the ritual enclosure as a kind of temple or place of pilgrimage, where devotees could receive "darshan" (a glimpse of a presiding deity), make a donation, perform a circumambulation, and return home with freshly acquired religious merit. The presence of these villagers, a diversion at first, became a nuisance, and during the final days developed into a threat. At times outsiders entered the enclosure (which the visiting scholars avoided scrupulously) and imperiled the filming, recordings, and indeed the ritual proceedings themselves. Some films were spoilt or made impossible, and in several recordings the chants and recitations, already endangered by Nambudiri chatter, were drowned in extraneous noise, thus more than preserving the flavor of authenticity. The priests themselves began to complain and at one point asked me to enter the enclosure and urge some of the outsiders to leave, as they hindered them in the performance of their tasks. (I declined.) On the whole, I opposed these intrusions by outsiders as best I could, operating with some Nambudiri youths, six policemen, and varying success. During the last days the best films and recordings were made during the early morning and night, when snoring was the only impediment. On the final day, a mass of some 10,000 people assembled, but was successfully kept at a distance.

The drowning out of our last recordings by outside noise is not as regrettable a loss as it may seem, for many of the rites were repetitions of earlier ones (in particular, the sequences of the Maitrāvaruṇa animal sacrifice). We continued with the recordings as long as we could, but our microphones, cables, and equipment had to be removed before the burning of the enclosure. When the ceremonies were almost completed, a live eagle flew high over the enclosure with its eagle-shaped altar. When the fire started, the crowds fled rapidly in all directions. Within two hours after

PLATE 20

PLATE 21

PLATE 20
Visitors North of the Sacred Enclosure

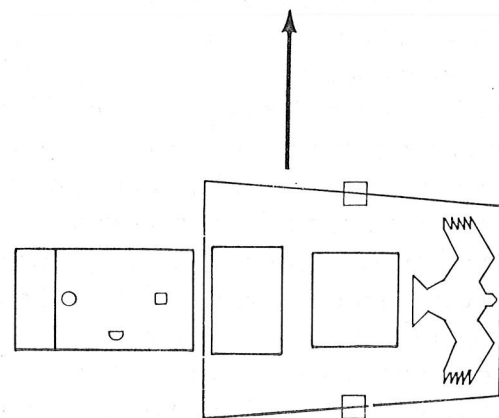
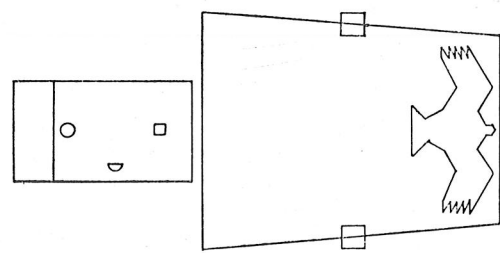


PLATE 21
Crowds During the Final Days



the completion of the ceremonies, the first monsoon rains came pouring down. There was a widespread rumor that the chairman of the International Committee danced in the rains "with the innocent pleasure and satisfaction of a child."

The appearance of the eagle and the outburst of the monsoon were widely considered signs that the ritual performance was successful. Like many other periodicals, the *Illustrated Weekly of India* completed its article "Kerala Yajna with Foreign Participation" (May 25, 1975) with a glorious description of these miraculous events. *The Hindu*, India's best English language newspaper, released on April 25 a news item entitled "Heavy Rain After Yagam":

TRICHUR, April 25

The 12-day "Athiratra Yagna" ended at Panjal, 30 kms from here, on Thursday with the completion of all the rites and burning of the yagnasala (sheds).

An hour later, a heavy downpour fell over the area which the sponsors claimed was true to tradition and marked the "success" of the yagna. Those present at the concluding rites claimed that a "garuda" (eagle) flew over the yagnasala as it was set on fire, in confirmation of another traditional belief.

Trichur town too had a heavy shower last evening.

The controversies that had surrounded the Agnicayana continued after the performance in one form or other. Some members of the International Committee felt that the films should be edited in accordance with scriptural authority, which would imply that all real or apparent deviations, irregularities, and poorly executed sequences should be removed. In their view, the film, in order to be an efficacious tool for the study of Vedic ritual, should present to the public only rites that conform to the injunctions of the śrautasūtras. The majority of the Committee disagreed with this view, considering it our duty as scholars to record what was found and not tamper with it. Accordingly, the film "Altar of Fire" pictures the Nambudiri performance of 1975, not what the texts prescribe. The analysis and description given here do primarily the same, though they place the events in their traditional setting.

When the film was later reviewed in the *American Anthropologist* (80 [1978]: 197-199), the reviewer, Robert A. Paul, claimed that Robert Gardner and I had staged the ritual—that it was, in fact, a media event, a circumstance that we allegedly had "gone to great lengths to try to deny and disguise." He also complained that the filmmakers went "so far as to try to keep out" outsiders who entered the enclosure and who took "the religious meaning of the ceremony seriously." My reply, which need not detain us here, was published in the same journal (81 [1979]: 346-347). The present

book by and large should make clear what happened in 1975, and this chapter on the vicissitudes of our Agnicayana project may place the event in its organizational context. Both combined illustrate the difference that sometimes exists between a thing-in-itself and its appearance to outsiders and in the press. Without such a difference, ignorance, rumors, and the media would suffice, and there would be no need for scholarship.

The 1975 Agnicayana was a traditional Nambudiri performance, though we were partly responsible for its occurrence and indirectly contributed to the nonsacrifice of goats, which was in some sense a deviation from the tradition. In the social sciences there is much interest in modernization and other changes that influence people's behavior and societies as a whole. The traditional philologist confines himself to texts and to what they can teach us about the past. In the humanities we are not only interested in people's behavior and in their past, but also in what is in their minds—for example, in what they know. Unfortunately, minds and knowledge are invisible, and therefore have to be made manifest, something that can be done in many ways, including outside prompting. This would cause no surprise to the scientist working in his laboratory, where he studies reactions he himself has induced. Naturally, we need not be surprised that, in any situation, the observer may influence what he observes. The philosopher muses on the boundaries of objectivity, the romantic may wish to limit such influence, and the moralist to direct it. The scholar or scientist is content to describe, analyze, and explain its occurrence and extent.